DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 333 428 CS 212 869

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TITLE A Time for Immersion, A Time for Reflection: The Multigenre Research Project and Portfolio Assessment.
PUB DATE Mar 91
NOTE 31p.; Paper presented at the Annual Spring Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (Indianapolis, IN, March 14-16, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Creative Writing; Higher Education; *Learning Processes; Literary Genres; *Portfolios (Background Materials); *Research Papers (Students); Self Evaluation (Individuals); *Student Evaluation; Writing Evaluation; Writing Improvement; *Writing Processes; Writing Strategies
IDENTIFIERS *Multigenre Research Projects; University of New Hampshire; Writing Development

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the senior honors thesis (a multigenre research paper), and narrates the process by which a senior English major at the University of New Hampshire and her project advisor worked together on this semester-long project. In the first section, the multigenre research paper is defined as a work that combines poems, monologues, character sketches, photographs, drawings, songs, newspaper interviews, narratives, stream-of-consciousness, and fiction generated from biographical fact. In addition, the paper asserts that a multigenre research paper not only allows the student to become a better writer, but illuminates for both the teacher and student the processes of thinking, writing, and learning. The second, third and fourth sections of the paper discuss the way portfolios can be used as a vital component in learning, and describe how this student compiled a portfolio that contained a sampling of writing representing her process of creation, her best work, her near misses or unsatisfactory pieces, and a portfolio cover letter explaining the meaning of these artifacts. The fifth section of the paper illustrates how a final interview allowed the student to reflect further, so that the teacher could learn about the student's learning, and the student could learn about her own learning process. The final sections discuss the importance of projects, and offer more evaluation of projects, portfolios, and teacher support of student learning. (Twenty-nine references are included.) (PRA)

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ED333428

Paper Presented at 1991 NCTE Spring Conference (Indianapolis)

A Time For Immersion, A Time for Reflection: The Multigenre Research Project and Portfolio Assessement

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A TIME FOR IMMERSION, A TIME FOR REFLECTION: THE MULTIGENRE RESEARCH PROJECT AND PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

> What we need in America is for students to get more deeply interested in things, more involved in them, more engaged in wanting to know; to have projects they can get excited about and work on over long periods of time; to be stimulated to find things out on their own (Howard Gardner quoted in Brandt, 1987/88, 33).

Meg was involved in just such a long term project during the final semester of her senior year at the University of New Hampshire. An English major who planned to teach middle school students one day, Meg had opted to do a senior honors thesis, and she had asked me--a teacher of hers the previous semester--to be her thesis advisor. To earn four hours of academic credit in the Honors English program, Meg researched a topic of her choosing and completed a project. For the final assessment of her work, I suggested we employ a kind of portfolio evaluation that required her to review her decision-making processes, to reflect upon the body of her semester's work in order to come to explicit perceptions about what she had done. I knew that I

would learn a great deal from Meg's reflection. I believed that she would, too.

For her honors thesis Meg chose to research nineteenth century English novelist Mary Shelly, author of Frankenstein and wife of Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. Out of her learning Meg wrote a multigenre research paper.

THE MULTIGENRE RESEARCH PAPER

Melding facts, interpretation, and imagination, the multigenre research paper is a blend of genres. Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje's The Collected Works of Billy the Kid is, perhaps, the best example from the literary world of the multigenre style. Ondaatje's recreation of the last few years of outlaw William Bonney's life is neither biography nor historical fiction; instead, it is a work that combines poems, monologues, character sketches, photographs, drawings, songs, newspaper interviews, narratives, stream-of-consciousness, and fiction generated from biographical fact. "Each genre reveals a facet of Billy the Kid or of the characters who moved in and out of his life. Each piece is self-contained, making a point of its own, and is not connected to any of the others by conventional transitional devices" (Romano, 1989, 124).

Meg was eager to write a research paper in such a

style. The previous semester her interest in Mary Shelley had been aroused in a children's literature course when she read a children's biography of the novelist. During that same semester she had learned about the multigenre research paper in a class named "Teaching Writing," which I taught to English majors who planned to go into teaching. Meg contacted me early in the second semester to ask if I would be her thesis advisor for her multigenre research project. I agreed.

"As I will not be restricted by formal prose," wrote Meg in her honors thesis proposal, "I shall be able to show Mary Shelley's experiences and emotions through short prose pieces, poems, dialogues and fictional newspaper articles. This multigenre report will not detail her life from beginning to end, but will instead serve as a collage of bits of information which when pieced together will provide a feel for Mary Shelley and the way she viewed and experienced life."

Meg wanted to learn more about Mary Shelley, a woman she had begun to admire. But Meg had another ambition, too. She wanted to write well. And she wanted to write in a style other than the expository one she had used for dozens of papers in high school and college. She wanted to write in a multitude of genres, trying her hand at many of the forms she had been reading as an English major; she wanted to become a

maker of literary artifacts, choosing to write in genres she deemed appropriate for revealing important aspects of Mary Shelley's life. She wanted to combine what is so often pejoratively called "creative writing" with scholarly investigation. Meg wanted to make art.

Dennie Palmer Wolf writes that "like other demanding cognitive activities, the arts involve people in symbol-use, analysis, problem solving, and invention" (Wolf, 1987, 26).

Notable endeavors.

Researching Mary Shelley for fifteen weeks, selecting topics to write about from that research, and writing about those topics in various genres would involve Meg in the very cognitive activities that Wolf cites as so demanding: symbol-use with language, the creation of texts both as writer and reader, analysis, problem solving, and invention. Although Meg had chosen a nontraditional way to demonstrate her knowledge, members of the English department at the University of New Hampshire thought her proposal had merit and approved her multigenre research project.

The second semester Meg immersed herself in Mary Shelley. She read the neglected novelist's fiction, criticism about that fiction, and, most notably, biographies, the best of which, according to Meg, was Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality by Emily Sunstein.

Meg and I met for an hour each week, at which time she updated me on her research, sharing with me the notes she had taken on her reading and telling me stories of Mary Shelley, her husband, Percy Shelley, her father, the moral philosopher, William Godwin, her feminist mother, Mary Wollestonecraft, and roguish Romantic poet, Lord Byron. Each week for an hour Meg's talk transported me to early nineteenth century literary England.

Over the course of the semester, I was in on Meg's learning and invention. She read me the poems, narratives, and various other genre experiments she had been writing as she engaged in her extensive reading. I was also in on the tangles of her research. During one brief period, for example, I saw Meg fall into such infatuation with the mystique of Percy Shelley and Lord Byron that she temporarily lost the focus of her research. I saw her thinking emerge, transform, and find shape.

I did my part as a teacher, too, during our weekly meeting. I listened to Meg's writing as a curious reader, responding and asking the real questions that came me. I passed along handouts to Meg of anything I came across that might be pertinent to her project. I gave her multigenre papers that high school seniors had written about Tennessee Williams, Jim Morrison, and Lady

Jane Grey (She'd already read ones about John Lennon and Marilyn Monroe). I gave her prose poems by Judith Steinburgh (1988) to use as possible composition models. When I saw that Meg was log-jammed in her writing during one stretch, I gave her an interview with Bernard Malamud. "Write your heart out," Malamud advised young writers (Malamud, 1983, 46).

I gave Meg suggestions for writing, too:

You might try some expository passages, I told her.

How about an interview with Dr. Frankenstein's creation?

Why not vividly describe Percy Shelley's charred heart that Leigh Hunt removed from the poet's funeral pyre?

The suggestions I made grew out of our conferences, when Meg divulged so much information. She had plans of her own, however, so she ignored most of my writing suggestions. Still, she said she was inspired to work after our weekly conferences. "I could have never done this independently," Meg wrote later, "I really needed the encouragement and interest of others." I was one of the others, so also were Meg's friends whom she consulted frequently about her writing.

As the semester's end moved closer, Meg writing ever more consistently, adding pieces to her growing stockpile of writing about Mary Shelley, we began

talking more about the final assessment of her work. I had told Meg at the beginning of the semester that although I was keenly interested in her final product--the multigenre research paper, I was just as interested in the processes of her thinking, in the development of her critical skills as she sought to shape literary artifacts out of the life of Mary Shelley. As a teacher I wanted to know about the discriminations she made and the problems she solved.

Meg wanted to find out about Mary Shelley; I wanted to find out about Meg. Moreover, I wanted her to find out about her own processes of thinking, writing, and learning. To obtain such data, Meg compiled a portfolio of her work.

PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

Portfolio assessment is becoming an ever more popular tool for uncovering the learning of people, both adults and students of all ages. Thomson describes the portfolio as "an accumulation of information about a student's experience and achievements" (Thomson, 1988). Other researchers have been more specific. In discussing artistic thinking Howard Gardner says that portfolios include "drafts, notes, false starts, things they [students] like and don't like." The student's "portfolio," writes Gardner, "becomes a kind of data

base that both teacher and student can look at to see what's been done and what's been learned" (quoted in Brandt, 1987/1988, 33).

Educators in Vermont propose that portfolio evaluation be used for its statewide assessment of writing. Each eleventh grader's portfolio, for example, would contain the following pieces for evaluators to rate: 1) a letter to an adult which explains the "choices of work in the portfolio and/or the process of composition" 2) a piece of imaginative writing 3) a prose piece from any curriculum area except English or language arts and 4) a piece of persuasive writing (Vermont, 1989, 9).

At Oyster River Middle School in Durham, New Hampshire, students in Linda Rief's language arts classes keep portfolios, and through these they are evaluated as literate young adults. "Portfolios," Rief explains, "have become each student's story of who they are as readers and writers . . . ." (Rief, 1990, 24). Rief imposes an "external" criteria for the portfolios so that the students may determine the "internal criteria." Each portfolio must contain a "student's two best pieces chosen during a six-week period from his or her working folder, trimester self-evaluations of process and product, and, at year's end, a reading/writing project" (Rief, 1990, 24).

"Portfolios come in many forms and are collected for many purposes," write the editors of Portfolio News, (Cooper and Davies, 1990, 7). Art students have long had experience with portfolios, putting them together to enable college art departments to glimpse their spontaneity, sensitivity to materials, ability to select relevant images, and consistency of vision that predicts a personal style (Hoffa, 1987, 18). Many colleges and universities have been in the business of granting college credit for students' experience in the world of work (Thomson, 1988; Budnick and Beaver, 1984; Degavarian, 1989; Sansregret, 1987; Rolls, 1987). Some colleges have used portfolio evaluation in freshman English programs. Instead of marking each paper and keeping a running string of grades for each student or instead of requiring that each student pass a proficiency examination, students must show--through portfolios--that their writing meets a standard set by the English Department (Ford and Larkin, 1978). To obtain a valid picture of a student's proficiency in writing requires "at least two or three samples of her writing--in two or three genres at two or three settings" (Elbow and Belanoff, 1986, 336).

Teachers in disciplines other than English have used portfolios to integrate writing assignments into their courses, both enriching course content and helping

students with their writing (Beers, 1985, 94). Portfolio evaluation has also been used to assess teachers (Wolf, 1988) and those who seek to become teachers (Smith, 1984). And at least one university was planning to require applicants to submit a portfolio composed of "samples of writing from several subject areas as a way to encourage writing across the curriculum in the high schools" (Anson, Brown, and Bridwell-Bowles, 1988).

Although portfolio assessment has multiple meanings and uses, it is important to remember that it isn't a student's portfolio that is being assessed, but rather "a student's knowledge and skills . . . ." (Degavarian, 1989, 5). With this in mind, one of the best reasons to use portfolio evaluation in a class that features writing is that it ". . . incorporates what we know about how students develop as writers by emphasizing process, multiple drafting, and collaborative learning" (Burnham, 1986, 134).

THE PORTFOLIO: ONE DEFINITION

Two weeks before her portfolio was due, I gave Meg a memo to explain my conception of a portfolio. I wanted her to have guidance in her portfolio preparation, and I wanted to have a place from which Meg and I could begin talking about the concept of

portfolio:

What is this portfolio I speak of?

In a portfolio I want you to present your best face. I'd like you to make choices from all the genre you've written in conjunction with Mary Shelley. These pieces should be what you consider your best work.

I'd like you to write about why you think these pieces are your best, why they well represent both the range and depth of what you can do as a writer. I'm interested in both. I want to get a picture of your versatility and your skill.

I am also interested in your writing process. Not that there is one ideal process that you will be measured against. No. But I want to see that you have a writing process in place that enables you to get writing done which you are proud of. So include in your portfolio all the notes and drafts that went into making one piece of writing. I'd like to follow that piece from embryonic stage right up to the final typed version.

A week before Meg turned in her portfolio to me, I gave her this more specific memo:

Meg:

1) Prepare two folders:

A) a folder of all your final products.

B) the portfolio of your choices that will represent you as a writer, reader, thinker, and learner, that will show the breadth and depth of your work, this accompanied by a cover letter.

What I want to do, Meg, is to read folder A--all of your finished multigenre pieces--and make my own determinations. Then I want to read your portfolio--folder B--that contains your choices of the pieces you want to represent you and the reasoning behind those choices. I'm looking to discover if there are things a teacher can gain by having students self-assess their work with a portfolio, instead of simply grading blindly without considering the learner.

2) The cover letter to accompany your portfolio.

> This is one of the major pieces of your work. The letter is your opportunity to explain, specifically, why you chose each piece to represent you. What made the pieces you chose stand out?
>
> In your letter I also want you to take me through the one piece that represents your writing process. I, as a reader, want to get inside your thinking processes at every stage.

A week later Meg gave me the folder containing all the final products of her multigenre writing and the portfolio of writing that she chose to represent her. It was then that my learning began in earnest.

MEG'S PORTFOLIO AND SELF-ASSESSMENT

Howard Gardner has written that assessment of artistic work should involve production, perception, and reflection. The acronym PROPER (Gardner and Greenbaum, 1986, 20) is a good reminder of this triumvirate. Production is actual doing in the artistic medium--painting, playing music, taking photographs, acting, writing. "Perception means learning to see better, to hear better, to make finer discriminations, to see connections between things. Reflection means to be able to say, 'What am I doing? Why am I doing it? What am I trying to achieve? Am I being successful? How can I revise my performance in a desirable way?'" (Gardner quoted in Brandt, 1987/88, 32). Production--and reflection upon that production--reveal perception.

This seemed a proper way of assessment--that which comes from the learner, she who had both struggled and

delighted in her independent study all semester. Although there isn't room here to discuss each aspect of Meg's portfolio and self-assessment, I want to highlight some of the things she revealed.

One piece which Meg included in her portfolio to represent her "best face" was a prose poem in the form of a rhythmic "labyrinthine sentence" (Weathers, 1980, 16). In the cover letter accompanying her portfolio, Meg reflected upon the production of this prose poem: "By making it one long sentence filled with information, I wanted to show the speed in which they made the trip. Their journey, like this piece, was short and packed."

> Road Trip
>
> Their flight from the tyranny that wished them apart took Mary, Percy (and Mary's step-sister Claire) eight-hundred miles (through Paris, Lucerne, Basel, Strausbourg, Mannheim, Mainz, Cologne and Rotterdam) by donkey, by foot (with Percy carrying the weak, old donkey that he had purchased out of pity--Mary walking barefoot in her long gown on the dusty roads), by carriage (and running after the carriage when the driver, who thought them odd for wanting to stop so often to admire the landscapes, would leave without them), by canoe and by boat, in forty-eight days (July 28 through September 13, 1814) on thirty pounds.

I asked Meg if she had consciously written "Road Trip" as a labyrinthine sentence or if, instead, she had realized she was writing one during composition. "I realized I had a labyrinthine sentence because I didn't want to stop it," Meg said. "I wanted to show haste. They just got up and went to all these places on thirty

pounds. I didn't want to say, 'They went 800 miles. They traveled through . . .' I thought the labyrinthine sentence gave you a sense of ecstasy."

Another piece Meg chose as one of her best was "Guilty of Too Much Innovation: An Interview with Mary Wollestonecraft Shelley." In the interview Meg travels back in time to Italy of 1818 to talk with Mary Shelly about her first novel, Frankenstein. Just over four double spaced pages long, this interview turned out to be the longest single piece in Meg's multigenre paper. It also proved to be the most difficult piece for her to write.

A major concern for Meg in writing this interview was voice. "It was so easy," she explained, "to slip into Meg talking with Meg talking as Mary rather than Meg talking to Mary." Meg didn't want to slide into casual, twentieth century undergraduate speech for herself, nor did she want to attach a phony, sophisticated British accent to Mary. She sought a subtle difference between the voices. Here's an excerpt of Meg as the interviewer from 1990--well-prepared, just as a good interviewer should be--talking with the author, then twenty-one:

> Meg: I read that although Blackwood's Edinborough Magazine and Edinborough Magazine praised your demonstrative powers, they found the content of Frankenstein too shocking.
> Mary: Too shocking--too different I should say.

> The Quarterly Review condemned it for being "guilty of too much innovation" and said it wasn't "truly gothic." It was praised, however, as a piece of "very bold fiction" by La Belle Assemblee, a magazine for upper-class women.

Meg was also stretched by the great amount of information she included in the interview. It is loaded with specific details about Frankenstein and the events surrounding its creation and publication. Readers learn about the genesis of Frankenstein, the negative reaction to the novel by many critics, Mary's indignation with that criticism, and her strong moral stance in the novel. Meg tells Mary how her tale of man's meddling into the secret of creating life has been bastardized in the twentieth century and how contemporary critics consider Frankenstein "the progenitor of a genre called science-fiction."

Lastly, Meg was proud of the interview because it had been difficult to write. The voices, the difference in time, the great amount of information to be included, the locale of the interview--all these challenged Meg with problems she had to identify, analyze, and solve through language and invention. The task had prompted Meg to make an outline before she began writing a draft, something she rarely does. In addition, although Meg is not averse to revising, her revisions of "Guilty of Too Much Innovation" were many and extensive. "Usually," said Meg, "if I really work on something, I overwork it,

and it just loses everything."

That had not happened with the interview.

Meg had written a half page introduction to her conversation with Mary Shelley, a strategy she learned from reading the Bernard Malamud interview. In the introduction Meg set the circumstance and scene and told how almost immediately Mary had asked how her husband was regarded in the twentieth century. In the interview itself, then, no mention is made of him. I asked Meg why she had dealt with Percy Shelley in the brief introduction instead of in the text of the interview. "I knew Mary would ask about Percy, since she was so devoted to him, but I didn't want to go on and on about that. I wanted the interview to be about Frankenstein. I didn't want to clutter it up."

Increasingly, I was forming the picture of a young woman who worked hard on her writing, who developed definite standards before and during her work, who made rhetorical decisions based upon those standards. And the picture I was forming wasn't of Mary Shelley.

I learned even more about Meg's uncompromising standards of composition through the piece of writing she included in her portfolio to reveal her creative process. The piece was one I'd seen Meg working on for weeks, one she was considering opening her multigenre paper with. Although she included this poem and all its

drafts in her portfolio, she had decided not to use it in her multigenre paper.

But the poem was important to her nevertheless. It had gone through five drafts before she abandoned it. The first draft was in pencil and featured Mary talking to herself about her full name--Mary Wollestonecraft Godwin Shelley, a name which wasn't really hers, Meg pointed out, but was, instead, her mother's, her father's, and her husband's. In Meg's fourth draft the dialogue shifted dramatically, taking the form of a poem with Mary as the persona. "I wanted to be more concise," said Meg. "I thought the poem would probably be my first piece, and I didn't want to have Mary talking back and forth to herself, so I thought that Mary could ask these questions about her name." Once Meg had the conciseness she was after, she revised the poem one more time, casting it in third person:

MARY WOLLESTONECRAFT GODWIN SHELLEY

Who was she that the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley delayed a journey to Wales to meet her and later left his wife Harriet to love?
Who was she that, if it was not for the opportunity to meet her, Lord Byron would have never agreed to see his former lover, her step-sister, again?
Who was she that ran off with a married man at seventeen?
Who was she that married that recently-widowed man, having already borne two of his children?
Who was she that is associated with bastardized movie versions of her most noted novel?

The daughter of William Godwin.
The daughter of Mary Wollestonecraft.

The lover of Percy Bysshe Shelley.
The wife of Percy Bysshe Shelley.
The author of Frankenstein.

BUT WHO WAS SHE?

In the end Meg set aside even this. "I had the worst time phrasing it," she said. "I had three different people read it to see if it made sense, and they got confused. So that was why I didn't want to use it. I liked the idea, but I didn't like how I had done it."

Instead of opening the multigenre paper with the poem, Meg began with the lead from an actual obituary published in the Athenaeum, February 15, 1851. She thought it showed that even an outside source viewed Mary in just such a troubling, identity denying way:

MRS. SHELLEY

> After having some years since disappeared from the world of literary occupation, the daughter of Godwin and Mary Wollestonecraft, the relict of the poet of "Adonais," died the other day--we believe, in her fifty fourth year. Her health had long been on the decline.

THE INTERVIEW

I have referred several times in this article to statements that Meg said to me. Several researchers have stressed the importance of a follow up interview with the student as an important part of portfolio evaluation (Budnick, 1984; Thompson, 1988; Wolf, 1987/88). I found such an interview indispensable.

After reading Meg's portfolio and learning so much about her as a writer and thinker, I was curious to know more. The interview satiated that curiosity. It also showed me that asking a student to reflect upon her best work, her best face, will not necessarily reveal all of her ways of working and her aesthetic development.

After reading her portfolio, I jotted down questions which I gave to Meg a few days before our interview. I didn't want to spring these on her; I wanted her to have time to reflect. I asked Meg to tell me about pieces of writing from her project she definitely would not choose to include in her portfolio. Often students are reluctant to associate unsatisfactory pieces of writing with their portfolios. They need reassurance that "both successes and 'failures' demonstrate writing growth and development" (Howard, 1990, 7). Meg didn't mind sharing what she considered her failed writing with me, as long as she had the opportunity to point out that she'd had trouble with them. The stories of these "failed" pieces revealed so much about Meg as a thinker and writer that in the future I will ask students to include unsatisfactory pieces, or failures, in their portfolios.

One piece Meg spoke of was a poem she had written about the Don Juan, the small boat Percy was sailing that capsized in a storm, drowning him and a companion.

I had remembered Meg working on drafts of this poem early in her study, during her time of lost focus and infatuation with Percy and Lord Byron. This had gone on for two or three weeks, until she realized the trap she had fallen into. "I had been getting books about Mary, but reading really interesting things about Byron and Shelley. I didn't know what Mary was doing or where Mary was. I thought, 'I'm doing it, too, just like everyone else seems to.'" This realization, said Meg, shocked her back into the "Mary mode."

Neither in her multigenre paper nor in her portfolio did Meg use the Don Juan, this poem she had been so fond of. "If I was doing my paper about Percy--I'd put it in, but the Don Juan wasn't pertinent to Mary. The poem dealt with how Percy died. It wasn't Mary looking at Percy's death."

Another piece which Meg had much personal investment in was "Mary Wollestonecraft Shelley and Me," an exposition that contrasted what she and Mary had each accomplished by the age of twenty-two. Although Meg hadn't published a novel, or borne three children, or traveled the European continent, she hadn't done badly in twenty-two years. She held a steady job, working thirty hours each week, and she was just one month away from college graduation with a B.A. in English. "Mary Wollestonecraft Shelly and Me" was almost everything for

Meg. She had planned to include it in her portfolio as one of her best pieces; it was also going to figure prominently among the works of her multigenre paper.

She used it in neither.

"I felt like it was bringing me too much into the paper. I didn't want to do that. What are people going to think about me when they've read that? Nobody really knows me. They're going to say, 'So what? Who cares what this me did or didn't do in contrast to Mary?'"

Repeatedly, I learned through the portfolio and follow up interview that Meg had demonstrated a willingness to put the integrity of the multigenre paper as a whole above her personal attachments to specific pieces she had written. This is a perception many experienced writers grapple with. If I hadn't interviewed Meg about these pieces of writing she had worked so hard on, but had set aside, I'd have been blind to the tough-minded editorial decisions she had made about her own production. What a writer doesn't consider her best work--and the reasons why--can be just as informative about her aesthetic growth as her best writing and the stories about them.

Dennie Palmer Wolf maintains that through the process of interviewing, "teachers can assess just how self-aware students are . . . ." (Wolf, 1987/88, 28).

This was certainly true of Meg's work with the multigenre research paper. Had I merely evaluated her final product, stamped a grade upon it, and written a succinct note to Meg, had I not asked her to gather her significant work together and to reflect upon it through cover letter and interview, I would have missed learning about Meg's critical skills and writing standards.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROJECTS

The multigenre paper about Mary Shelley was Meg's choice. It was her project. If she carried it through in good faith, the English Department would grant her four credit hours. She had ample time to do her work, a full semester. She had regular response from a teacher and peers, people who were interested in her work. Ownership. Choice. Time. Response. All aspects of work imperative to the growth of writers (Graves, 1983; Atwell, 1987).

The project provided Meg with a topic she could become absorbed in. In his book Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes about experiences when people are involved in something that captivates such concentration in them that they lose track of time, that they forget any self-consciousness they might otherwise feel, that they are challenged yet have the skills to meet those challenges,

and that during the activity they get clear, frequent clues about how well they are doing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 71).

Meg's project became a flow experience for her with many optimal moments. She described the time she found Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality, and sat down at a table in the Concord, New Hampshire public library, fairly sinking into the pages, not stopping her reading until the lights flicked on and off to signal the library's imminent closing. She told of leaving her weekly conferences--excited and inspired--and going at her writing anew. She told of entire days spent studying and writing, unaware of the passage of time until her friends arrived to take her to supper. One of Meg's most optimal experiences, however, she noted in her portfolio cover letter. "I've never been so confident in my conversational skill than when I've been telling people about this project."

In the interview which followed my perusal of her portfolio, I asked Meg about this new found confidence in her conversational skill. Meg revealed a critical link between her personal identity, her past, and her plans for the future.

> The project gave me a lot of self-confidence. When the teacher of my women's lit class asked me to talk about Mary Wollestonecraft, I wasn't nervous. Normally, I would have been. I want to teach, and I want my students to do multigenre papers. I wanted to do one myself so I knew what I

> was talking about. I didn't want to say, 'Hey, kids, do a multigenre paper' and I've never done one before. I wouldn't know what to do. I want to have experience with it. I can see how students would benefit from doing work such as this. They become authorities. I could see that if I had done this in seventh grade--when I didn't talk to anybody unless I had do--and if you had put me at a table with somebody else to workshop our writing, I would have felt ok because I would have felt like I knew a lot."

PROJECTS, PORTFOLIOS, AND TEACHER SUPPORT OF STUDENT LEARNING

Meg described the day after she turned in her portfolio and her multigenre paper:

> I went down to the Bagelry where I work. A friend of mine there, Michael, is doing his senior thesis on the search for the Grail, so we're always talking thesis while we're working. "Michael," I said, "I've done my thesis! It's this thick and it's done and I turned it in!" An old woman sitting at one of the tables next to us started laughing. "Excuse me," she said, "but I was a professor. When students turned in their theses to me, all I ever heard them say was 'Here's my thesis. Thank you very much.' I never saw this excitement. I'm so happy."

Meg's end product, the culmination of her semester project, was surely worthy of exhilaration. But the story behind that work was even more exhilarating. And it's a story I wouldn't have discovered if I hadn't asked Meg to reflect upon the body of her work and to gather together samples of it in a portfolio.

I followed one student for fifteen weeks. I remembered teaching high school with a typical teaching load of 150 students. I couldn't have followed each of them the way I followed Meg. But I wouldn't have needed

to. I am not shunting responsibility here, but simply acknowledging that students learn whether a teacher is aware of it or not. The teacher's job, as I see it, is to set up the classroom so that students may pursue through reading, writing, talking, and listening that which they passionately care about, that which they can become blissfully lost in.

Long term independent projects like the multigenre research paper allow students room for such passionate learning. Teaching can support that. Teachers confer with students, listening, responding, and teaching. Students confer with each other. The prevailing attitude toward learning in the classroom is one that expects students to be productive. If students have not produced a significant body of work, then the process of reflecting, selecting, and perceiving becomes fraudulant. Self-assessment is short-circuited. Classroom activities that allow students time, choice, ownership, and response clear the way for portfolios to be used as a vital component in learning.

Students compile portfolios that contain a sampling of writing that represents their process of creation, their best work, and their near misses or unsatisfactory pieces. In portfolio cover letters students explain the meaning of those artifacts. Final interviews with each student--although not as lengthy as my interview with

Meg--would cause students to reflect further. Teachers learn about students' learning. And more importantly, students learn about their learning:

Here is what I did that is significant.

Here is why it is significant.

Here is the process I went through.

And here is what I've learned from that process.

When you get down to it, it's not the portfolio that matters most. The portfolio could become no more than a file, dog-eared, jammed in a desk or stored in a box high atop a cabinet. What does matter, however, is the "portfolio process" (Howard, 7). That is the key to further learning and growth through writing and reading. After production, it is students' selection and reflection that solidifies learning, that explicitly reveals to them their perceptions.

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